

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



People Who Eat Darkness

Richard Lloyd Parry

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About the Book

In the summer of 2000, Jane Steare received the phone call every mother dreads. Her daughter Lucie Blackman – tall, blonde, and twenty-one years old – had stepped into the vastness of a Tokyo summer and disappeared forever. That winter, her dismembered remains were found buried in a desolate seaside cave.

Her disappearance was mystifying. Had Lucie been abducted by a religious cult? Who was the mysterious man she had gone to meet? What did her work, as a ‘hostess’ in the notorious Roppongi district of Tokyo, really involve? And could Lucie’s fate be linked to the disappearance of another girl some ten years earlier?

Over the course of a decade, Richard Lloyd Parry has travelled to four continents to interview those caught up in the story and been given unprecedented access to Lucie’s bitterly divided family to reveal the astonishing truth about Lucie and her fate.

With the finesse of a novelist, he reveals the astonishing truth about Lucie and her fate. *People Who Eat Darkness* is, by turns, a non-fiction thriller, a courtroom drama and the biography of both a victim and a killer. It is the story of a young woman who fell prey to unspeakable evil, and of a loving family torn apart by grief. And it is a fascinating insight into one of the world’s most baffling and mysterious societies, a light shone into dark corners of Japan that the rest of the world has never glimpsed before.

About the Author

Richard Lloyd Parry is Asia Editor of *The Times*. He was born in 1969 and educated at Oxford. He has been visiting Asia for eighteen years and since 1995 has lived in Tokyo as a foreign correspondent, first for the *Independent* and now for *The Times*. He has reported from twenty-one countries and several wars, including Iraq, Afghanistan, Indonesia, East Timor, North Korea, Papua New Guinea, Vietnam, Kosovo and Macedonia. His work has also appeared in the *London Review of Books* and the *New York Times Magazine*. He is the author of *In The Time of Madness*, an eyewitness account of the violence that interrupted in Indonesia in the 1990s.

By the same author

In The Time Of Madness: Indonesia On The Edge Of Chaos

For Mum and Dad

People Who Eat Darkness:
Love, Grief and a Journey into Japan's
Shadows

by Richard Lloyd Parry



Jonathan Cape
LONDON

Among the old men who came to this ‘house of the sleeping beauties’, there must be some who not only looked wistfully back to the vanished past but sought to forget the evil they had done through their lives . . . among them must be some who had made their successes by wrongdoing and kept their gains by repeated wrongdoing. They would not be men at peace with themselves. They would be among the defeated, rather – victims of terror. In their hearts as they lay against the flesh of naked young girls put to sleep would be more than fear of approaching death and regret for their lost youth. There might also be remorse, and the turmoil so common in the families of the successful. They would have no Buddha before whom to kneel. The naked girl would know nothing, would not open her eyes, if one of the old men were to hold her tight in his arms, shed cold tears, even sob and wail. The old man need feel no shame, no damage to his pride. The regrets and sadness could flow quite freely. And might not the ‘sleeping beauty’ herself be a Buddha of sorts? And she was flesh and blood. Her young skin and scent might be forgiveness for the sad old men.

[Yasunari Kawabata, *House of the Sleeping Beauties*](#)

MISSING

行方不明の英国人女性をさがしています。



ルーシー・ブラックマン
Lucie BLACKMAN

年 齢 : 21歳
身 高 : 175cm
体 格 : 中位
髪 の 色 : 金髪
瞳 の 色 : 青

7月1日(土)に、
東京で発見された以来、
行方が分かっていません。

A g e : 21 years
H e i g h t : 175cm Medium Build
H a i r C o l o r : Blonde
E y e C o l o r : Blue

She was last seen in Tokyo
on Saturday July 1st. Since
then she has been missing.

もし本人を見かけたり、または
何か情報をお持ちの方は
警視庁に連絡
tel. 03-3479-0110
または最寄りの警察署に連絡を
お願いいたします。

If anyone has seen her, or has any
information relating to her, contact
Aizuba Police Station
tel. 03-3479-0110
or your nearest police station.

ルーシー・ブラックマン(英国人女性)
Lucie BLACKMAN (British Female)

PROLOGUE: LIFE BEFORE DEATH

LUCIE WAKES UP late, as usual. A line of daylight flares at the edge of the shrouded window, and pierces the dim interior. A low, cramped, colourless space. There are posters and postcards on the walls, and blouses and dresses on overburdened hangers. On the floor, two human shapes on two futon mattresses: one head of blonde hair, one of brown. They sleep in T-shirts, or naked beneath a single sheet, for even at night it is too hot and clammy for anything but the thinnest layer against the skin. Outside, crows are cawing and scuffling on the telegraph wires which tangle between the buildings. It was four in the morning when they went to sleep, and the plastic alarm clock shows that it is almost noon. The brown head remains huddled on its pillow as Lucie puts on her dressing gown and goes to the bathroom.

She refers to her home in Tokyo as ‘the shithouse’ – the bathroom is one of the reasons why. Half a dozen people share it, plus their overnight guests, and the room is vile with their parings and detritus. Exhausted tubes of toothpaste curl on the edges of the sink, sodden lumps of soap drool on the floor of the shower, and the plughole wears a slimy cap of clotted hair, skin and toenail clippings. Lucie’s own vanity products, which are numerous and expensive, are brought into and removed from the bathroom on every visit, along with her combs, brushes and make-up. Her toilet is lengthy and fastidious, a practised drill of shampooing, rinsing, conditioning, soaping, towelling, patting, smoothing, cleansing, moisturising, absorbing, tweezing, brushing, flossing and blow-drying. Lucie epitomises the distinction between simply taking a shower in the morning and *grooming*. If you were running late, you wouldn’t want to find yourself behind her in the queue for the bathroom.

What does Lucie see when she looks into the mirror? A full, fair face, surrounded by naturally blonde hair falling below the shoulder. A solid chin; strong, even, white teeth; cheeks that lift and dimple when she smiles.

A rounded nose; sharp, closely plucked brows and small, dark-blue eyes which angle away from the horizontal. Lucie deplores her 'slanty eyes' and spends long mirror hours wishing them away. They are subtly and unexpectedly exotic on a woman otherwise so fair-complexioned, so blue-eyed and long-limbed.

Lucie is tall – 5'9" – with a good bust and hips. She pays anxious attention to the surges of her fluctuating weight. In May, after the effort of travelling to Japan, moving into the shithouse and finding work, she was slimmer than this, but after a few weeks of late nights in the club, she has 'drunk it back on again'. On her worst days, she is filled with contempt for her own appearance. She feels bloated and saggy; she is tortured by self-consciousness about the birthmark on her thigh, and the dark mole between her brows. A dispassionate observer might describe her with old-fashioned and faintly equivocal words such as 'buxom' and 'comely'. The brown-haired girl on the other mattress, Lucie's best friend, Louise Phillips, is far more of a conventional beauty: slim, small, pert-featured. But for most of the time, to other people at least, Lucie communicates a confidence and an ease. Her way of laughing, of moving her hands as she speaks, of shaking her hair, her habit of unselfconsciously touching the person she is talking to – all of this lends her a charm which appeals to women as well as to men.

Lucie emerges from the bathroom. What does she do next? I know that she doesn't write in her diary, which has been neglected for almost a fortnight. She doesn't call Scott, her boyfriend, who serves on the American aircraft carrier in the port city of Yokosuka. Later, among her personal possessions, her family will find an unsent postcard, addressed to her great friend from home, Samantha Burman. Perhaps she writes that card now.

Darling Sammy, just a little note from Tokyo to say how good it was to talk to you the other evening. I'm so glad you've found a lovely friend/guy/mate (whatever he is). I know it's easier for me over here as my everyday life has changed and Sundays are so different at the moment, but I wanted to let you know that life is incomplete without you and although I'm not sure when, we will be together soon, be it wherever I am, or me back home. I do love you and miss you terribly and always will. All my love, Lulu

At half past one the telephone rings downstairs. One of the other flatmates answers, and calls from below: it is for Lucie. Unlike Louise, who has her own cell phone, given to her by one of her customers, Lucie has had to rely on the shithouse's shared pay telephone. It is a clunky pink plastic box in the kitchen, fed by ¥10 coins; conversations on it can be overheard by anyone else who is downstairs. But Lucie will not have to put up with this unsatisfactory situation for much longer; in just a few hours, she will have a mobile of her own.

Louise is up by now, and sits in the common living room during her friend's brief conversation. It was him, Lucie tells her after hanging up the pink receiver: the meeting has been postponed by an hour until three o'clock; he will call again and she will meet him at the railway station. Then they will have a late lunch, but she will be back in good time for the agreed eight o'clock rendezvous – a night of dancing with Louise and one of the other girls from the club. Lucie takes off her dressing gown and chooses her outfit for the day: her black dress, the silver necklace with the heart-shaped crystal pendant, and the Armani watch. Her sunglasses are in her black handbag. Three o'clock comes and goes. At 3.20 the pink phone rings again for Lucie; he is on his way, and will be at the station in ten minutes.

The crows flap and complain as Lucie steps outside. As she does, she experiences the small daily shock of re-entry which every foreigner in Tokyo knows. A sudden, pulse-quickenning awareness of the obvious: Here I am – *in Japan*. Every morning it takes her by surprise – the sudden consciousness of profound difference. Is it something unfamiliar about the angle of the light, or the way that sounds register in the summer air? Or is it the demeanour of the people on the street and in the cars and the trains – unobtrusive, but purposeful; neat, courteous, self-contained, but intent, as if following secret orders?

Even after years and decades have passed, you never get over the excitement, the unique daily thrill, of living as a foreigner in Japan.

The shithouse – or Sasaki House, to give it its formal name – is a grimy plaster-covered building at the dead end of an alleyway. Lucie turns left out of it, and walks past more exhausted-looking apartment buildings, a children's playground with wooden climbing frames, and an old-fashioned

restaurant, serving rice omelettes and curry. Then comes a jewel in the midst of the drabness – a classical Noh theatre, in smooth modernistic concrete, surrounded by sculpted hedges and a gravel garden.

Lucie turns right, and the neighbourhood undergoes a sudden transformation. The atmosphere up to here has been shabby and suburban; now, less than five minutes from home, Lucie is walking along a main road in a big city. Railways and an expressway run above it on elevated piles. Five hundred yards further on is Sendagaya Station, where bus routes intersect with subway and commuter lines. It is a busy place on a Saturday afternoon, noisy with traffic, and with people in short sleeves and summer dresses bustling in and out of the station and the Olympic Gymnasium on its far side. He's waiting there for Lucie, in front of the police station; his car is nearby.

Shortly before Lucie, Louise leaves the house on her own mission: to exchange a pair of shoes in Shibuya, the great shopping district of southwest Tokyo. She takes the train to Shibuya Station, where nine different lines deposit 2.5 million passengers every day, and where Louise quickly becomes lost. She wanders confusedly among the Saturday crowds, along streets of shops and restaurants which, despite their dizzying diversity, somehow manage to be indistinguishable from one another. After much time-wasting, she finds the shop she is looking for, then walks wearily back to the station.

Just after five o'clock, her mobile rings. The screen displays the words: User Unsent. But the voice is that of Lucie, who should be heading home soon to prepare for the night ahead. Instead she is calling from inside a moving car. She's on the way to the 'seaside', she says, where she will have lunch with him (although it is getting very late to talk of lunch). But there is no need to change their plans for the evening, she tells Louise; she will be home in good time, and she will call again in an hour or two to say exactly when. She sounds happy and cheerful, but self-conscious in the manner of someone whose conversation can be overheard. She is calling from his mobile, she tells Louise, so she cannot chat for long.

Later, Louise would say that she was surprised by this development, and that it was out of character for Lucie to get into a man's car and drive out of

Tokyo with him. But it was very like her to make this call. Lucie and Louise have known one another since they were girls, and this is the kind of friendship that they have. They phone one another just for the sake of it, to reaffirm closeness and trust, even when there is little to say.

It's an oppressively hot and humid summer afternoon. Louise visits her and Lucie's favourite shop, the department store Laforet, and buys shiny stickers and glitter to decorate their faces for their night of dancing. The sun sinks in the sky; the evening begins, spreading a cloak over the dim residential shabbiness, and illuminating in neon the restaurants, bars and clubs, all the places of promise and delight.

Two hours pass.

At six minutes past seven, when Louise is back at home, her cell phone rings again. It's Lucie, full of high spirits and excitement. He is *very* nice, she says. As promised, he has given her a new mobile phone – and a bottle of Dom Perignon champagne, which she and Louise can drink together later. It's not clear exactly where she is, and Louise doesn't think to ask. But she will be back within an hour.

At seventeen minutes past seven, Lucie calls the mobile phone of her boyfriend, Scott Fraser, but connects only to the answering service. She records a short but happy message, promising a meeting tomorrow.

There Lucie vanishes.

It's the beginning of a Saturday evening in Tokyo, but there will be no girls' night out, and no date with Scott. In fact, there will be nothing else at all. Stored in the digital data bank of the telephone corporation, where it will be automatically erased in a few days' time, the mobile phone message is Lucie's last living trace.

When Lucie failed to return as promised, Louise's alarm was immediate and overwhelming. Later, people would point to this as a reason for suspicion: why *would* Louise have got into such a panic, so soon? Her flatmates, who were sitting in the living room smoking marijuana, couldn't understand her agitation. Little more than an hour after Lucie's expected return, Louise was already telephoning her mother, Maureen Phillips, in Britain. ['Something has happened to Lucie,' she told her.](#) Then she went to

Casablanca, the hostess club in the entertainment district of Roppongi where the two of them worked.

‘I remember that first day very clearly, the first of July,’ said a man who was there at the time. ‘It was a Saturday night, and it was Lucie and Louise’s day off that week. Neither of them was supposed to work. But quite early on, Louise came in and said, “Lucie’s missing. She went to meet a customer. She’s not come back.” Well, it’s not so surprising. It’s still only eight, nine o’clock. I said, “It’s normal, nothing really strange, Louise. Why are you so worried?” She said, “Lucie’s the kind of person who will come back, or if something happens she’ll call me.” And it was true for them. What one was doing, the other one always knew about. They had a really strong relationship. Louise knew that something was wrong, right away.’

Louise kept calling the club all night, asking if anyone had news of Lucie; but there was no news. She walked around Roppongi, visiting every one of the bars and clubs where she and Lucie used to go: Propaganda, Deep Blue, the Tokyo Sports Café, Geronimo’s. She talked to the men who handed out flyers on Roppongi Crossing, asking if any of them had seen Lucie. Then she took a taxi to Shibuya and went to Fura, the club where the two of them had been planning to go that night. She knew that she wouldn’t find her friend there – why would Lucie have gone on ahead alone, without coming home first, or at least calling her? But she couldn’t think of anything else to do.

It rained for much of the night – warm, perspiration-inducing Tokyo summer rain. It was light by the time Louise returned to Sasaki House early on Sunday morning, having been into every bar that she could think of. Lucie was not at home, and there was no message from her.

Louise telephoned Caz, a Japanese man who worked at Casablanca as a waiter, and debated what to do. Caz called a few of the bigger hospitals, but none of them had heard of Lucie. Wasn’t it at least possible, he suggested, that Lucie had decided to spend the night with her ‘nice’ customer, and simply failed to let Louise know? Louise said that it was unthinkable; and no one was closer to Lucie than Louise.

The obvious next step was to contact the police. But this prospect brought its own load of anxiety. Lucie and Louise had entered Japan as

tourists, on ninety-day visas which explicitly forbade them from working. All the girls in the clubs, in fact most of the foreigners working in Roppongi, were in the same situation. They, and the clubs which employed them, were breaking the law.

On Monday morning, Caz took Louise to Azabu Police Station in Roppongi, and filed a missing-person report. They explained that Lucie was a tourist on holiday in Tokyo who had gone out for the day with a Japanese man she'd met; they made no mention of hostessing or Casablanca or its customers.

The police showed little interest.

At three o'clock in the afternoon, Louise went to the British Embassy in Tokyo. She spoke to the vice-consul, a Scot named Iain Ferguson, and told him the full story. Ferguson was the first of many people to express bafflement at the circumstances in which Lucie had gone out on that afternoon. [I asked what was known of the client](#) and was taken aback to hear nothing,' he wrote in a memo the next day. 'According to Louise, girls within the club routinely, and with the club's consent, hand out their business cards and clients as a result often make private appointments with the girls. I stated I found that hard to believe, that the club would allow the girls to meet with clients without their knowledge. Louise however remained firm. Certainly Lucie had said nothing of her client, his name, anything of his car or even where they had gone other than the beach . . .'

Ferguson pressed Louise on Lucie's character. Was she capricious, unpredictable, unreliable? Was she naïve or easily influenced? 'All of Louise's responses drew a consistent picture,' he wrote, 'of a confident, worldly-wise, intelligent individual who had the experience and judgement not to have foolishly put herself in danger.' Why, then, had she got into a car with a complete stranger? 'Louise could . . . not explain, restating that such behaviour was out of character for Lucie.'

No one has more experience than a consular officer of the folly of the British abroad. And no one understands better that, most of the time, when a young person 'disappears' there is a predictably mundane explanation: a tiff between friends or lovers; drugs, or drunkenness, or sex. But Lucie had telephoned twice during the afternoon to update Louise on her whereabouts.

Having called to say that she would be back within an hour, it was hard to imagine that she would not have done so again, even if her plans had changed. Iain Ferguson rang Azabu Police Station and told them that the Embassy was deeply concerned about Lucie, and that they regarded it not as a simple missing-person case, but as a probable abduction.

Louise left the Embassy. In the two nights since Lucie's disappearance she had hardly slept. She was in a torment of uncertainty and tension. It was unbearable to be alone, or to spend any time in the room which she shared with Lucie. She went to the apartment of a friend, where other people who knew Lucie were also gathering.

Just before half past five, her mobile rang again, and she snatched it up.

'Hello?' Louise said.

—Am I speaking to Louise Phillips? said a voice.

'Yes, this is Louise. Who's this?'

—My name is Akira Takagi. Anyway, I'm ringing on behalf of Lucie Blackman.

'Lucie! My God, where is she? I've been so worried. Is she there?'

—I am with her. She is here. She is fine.

'Oh, God, thank God. Let me speak to Lucie. I need to speak to her.'

It was a man's voice. He spoke English confidently, but with a distinct Japanese accent. He was at all times calm and controlled and matter-of-fact, almost friendly, even when Louise became agitated and upset.

—She must not be disturbed now, the voice said. —Anyway, she is in our dormitory. She is studying and practising a new way of life. She has so much to learn this week. She can't be disturbed.

To her friends, Louise was frantically mouthing, 'It's him', and signalling for paper and a pen.

'Who is this?' she said. 'Are you the one she went out with on Saturday?'

—I met Lucie on Sunday. She met my guru on Saturday, my group's leader.

'Your guru?'

—Yes, my guru. Anyway, they met on a train.

‘But, she . . . when I spoke to her, she was in a car.’

—The traffic was bad, so bad, and she didn’t want to be late to meet you. So she decided to take the train. Just before she got on the train she met my guru and she made a life-changing decision. Anyway, she decided to join his cult that night.

‘A cult?’

—Yes.

‘What d’you mean, a cult? What . . . Where is Lucie? Where is this cult?’

—It is in Chiba.

‘What? Say that again. Can you spell it?’

—In Chiba. I spell it: C-H-I-B-A.

‘Chiba. Chiba. And . . . what is it called?’

—It’s the Newly Risen Religion.

‘The what? What is . . .’

—The Newly Risen Religion.

The man at the end of the phone calmly spelled this phrase out too, letter by letter.

Louise’s thoughts were churning. ‘I have to speak to Lucie,’ she said. ‘Let me speak to her.’

—She’s not feeling too well, said the voice. —Anyway, she doesn’t want to talk to anyone now. Maybe she will talk to you at the end of the week.

‘Please,’ said Louise. ‘Please, please, let me talk to her.’

The line went dead.

‘Hello? Hello?’ said Louise, but there was nobody there. She looked at the small silver telephone in her hands.

A few heartbeats later, it rang again.

With trembling fingers, she pressed the pick-up button.

—I'm so sorry, said the same voice. —The signal must have broken. Anyway, Lucie can't talk to you now. She's not feeling well. Maybe she will talk to you at the end of the week. But she has started a new life, and she won't be coming back. I know that she has a lot of debts, £6,000 or £7,000. But she is paying them off in a better way. Anyway, she just wants to let you and S'kotto know she's OK. She is planning a better life.

He said, quite distinctly, 'S'kotto' – the characteristic Japanese rendering of the unfamiliar English name Scott.

—She has written a letter to Casablanca to say that she will not be coming back to work.

There was a pause; Louise began to sob.

—Anyway, what is your address?

Louise said, 'My address . . .'

—The address of your apartment, in Sendagaya.

'Why . . . why d'you need to know my address?'

—I want to send you some of Lucie's belongings.

Louise's dread, which up until now had been on behalf of her friend, suddenly became personal. 'He wants to know where I live,' she was thinking. 'He's going to come after *me*.' She said, 'Well, Lucie knows it. She knows her address.'

—She is not feeling too well now and she cannot remember.

'Oh, I can't remember either.'

—Well . . . can you remember where your house is near?

'No, no, I can't remember.'

—What about the street? Can you remember the street?

'No, I . . .'

—Anyway, I need to send her belongings back.

'I can't remember . . .'

—If it's a problem, don't worry.

'I haven't got it on me now . . .'

—That's OK. Don't worry.

Louise was overcome by panic and emotion. Weeping, she handed the phone to a friend, an Australian man who had lived in Tokyo for years.

‘Hello,’ he said in Japanese. ‘Where is Lucie?’

After a few moments, he handed the phone back. ‘He’ll only speak English,’ he said. ‘He only wants to speak to you.’

But Louise had collected her thoughts. She realised that it was important to draw the conversation out, to try to find out where Lucie was.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘This is Louise again. So – can I join your cult?’

The voice seemed to hesitate. Then it said, —What religion are you?

Louise said, ‘Well, I’m a Catholic, but Lucie’s a Catholic too. I don’t mind changing. I want to change my life too.’

—Anyway, it’s up to Lucie. It’s up to what she thinks. I will think about it.

‘Please let me speak to Lucie,’ said Louise, desperately.

—I’ll speak to my guru and ask him.

‘Please let me speak to her,’ Louise cried. ‘I’m begging you, please, let me speak to her.’

—Anyway, I have to go now, the voice said. —I’m sorry. I just had to let you know that you won’t see her again. Goodbye.

The cell phone line went dead for the second time.

Lucie disappeared on Saturday, 1 July 2000, at the mid-point of the first year of the twenty-first century. It took a week for the news to reach the world at large. The first report appeared the following Sunday, 9 July, when a British newspaper carried a short article about a missing tourist named ‘Lucy Blackman’. There were more detailed stories the next day, in the British and Japanese papers. They named Louise Phillips, as well as Lucie’s sister, Sophie Blackman, who was said to have flown to Tokyo to look for her, and her father, Tim, who was on his way there. Reference was made to a threatening phone call, and the vague suggestion that she had been kidnapped by a cult. Two of the stories spoke of ‘fears’ that she had been ‘forced into prostitution’; Lucie was identified as a former British Airways stewardess. But the following day’s news identified her as a ‘bar girl’ or

‘nightclub hostess’ in ‘Tokyo’s red light district’. Now Japanese television had seized on the story and camera crews were prowling through Roppongi, looking for blonde foreigners. The combination of the missing girl’s youth, nationality, hair colour, and the implications of the job she had been doing had tipped the story over the threshold which separates mere incident from news; it was now impossible to ignore. Within twenty-four hours, twenty British reporters and photographers and five separate television crews had flown to Tokyo, to join the dozen correspondents and freelancers permanently based there.

That day, 30,000 posters were printed and distributed across the country, mostly in Tokyo and in Chiba, the prefecture immediately to the east of the capital.

‘MISSING,’ ran the bilingual text along the top and, at the bottom, ‘Lucie BLACKMAN (British Female)’.

Age: 21 years

Height: 175cm Medium Build

Hair Color: Blonde

Eye Color: Blue

She was last seen in Tokyo on Saturday July 1st. Since then she has been missing.

If anyone has seen her, or has any information relating to her, contact Azabu Police Station or your nearest police station.

The poster was dominated by the photograph of a girl in a short black dress sitting on a sofa. She had blonde hair, with white teeth exposed in a nervous smile. The camera looked down on her from above, making her face appear broad and childlike. With her large head, long hair and firm chin, the girl in the poster looked like no one more than Alice in Wonderland.

Lucie Blackman was already dead. She died before I ever knew that such a person existed. In fact, it was only because she was dead – or missing, which was as much as anyone knew at the time – that I took an interest in

her at all. I was the correspondent for a British newspaper, living in Tokyo. Lucie Blackman was a young British woman who had disappeared there – which is to say that, in the terms in which I first thought of her, she was a *story*.

At first the story was a puzzle, which developed over time into a profound mystery. Lucie emerged as a tragic victim, and finally as a cause, the subject of vigorous, bitter contestation in a Japanese court. The story attracted much attention in Japan and Britain, but it was fickle and inconsistent. For months at a time there would be no interest in Lucie's case; then some fresh development would bring a sudden demand for news and explanation. In its outlines the story was familiar enough – girl missing: body found: man charged – but, on inspection, it became so complicated and confusing, so fraught with bizarre turns and irrational developments, that conventional reporting of it was almost inevitably unsatisfactory, provoking more unanswered questions than it could ever quell.

This quality of evasiveness, the sense in which it outstripped familiar categories of news, made the story fascinating. It was like an itch that no four columns of newspaper copy or three-minute television item could ever scratch. The story infected my dreams; even after months had passed, I found it impossible to forget Lucie Blackman. I followed the story from the beginning and through its successive stages, trying to craft something consistent and intelligible out of its kinks and knots and roughness. It took me ten years.

I had lived in Tokyo for most of my adult life, and travelled across Asia and beyond. As a reporter of natural disasters and wars, I had seen something of grief and darkness. But Lucie's story brought me into contact with aspects of human experience which I had never glimpsed before. It was like the key to a trapdoor in a familiar room, a trapdoor concealing secrets – frightening, violent, monstrous existences to which I had been oblivious. This new knowledge made me feel obscurely embarrassed and naïve. It was as if I, the experienced reporter, had been missing something extraordinary in a city which it was my professional pride to know intimately.

It was only when she was slipping from public consciousness that I began to consider Lucie as a person, rather than a story. I had met her

family over the course of their visits to Japan. As a reporter of the case, I had been treated first with cautious mistrust, and eventually with cautious friendship. Now I travelled back to Britain and visited the Blackman family on their home ground. I tracked down friends and acquaintances from the different stages of Lucie's life. One led to another; those who were at first reluctant to speak were eventually persuaded. To Lucie's parents, sister and brother, I returned repeatedly over a period of years. The accumulated recordings of these interviews add up to several days.

I thought that grasping the essentials of a life which ended at twenty-one would be a simple task. At first glance, there was nothing obvious to distinguish Lucie Blackman from millions of others like her: a young, middle-class woman from the south-east of England, of moderate affluence and education. Lucie's life had been 'ordinary', 'normal'; by far the most remarkable thing about it was the way it ended. But the closer I looked, the more intriguing she became.

It should have been obvious, for we all know it from our own lives – but after twenty-one years, Lucie's personality and character were already too various, too complicated for any one person, even those closest to her, wholly to understand. Everyone who knew her knew someone subtly different. A few years on from childhood, her life was already a complexity of allegiances, emotions and aspirations, often contradictory. Lucie was loyal, honest, and capable of deceit. She was confident, dependable, and vulnerable. She was straightforward and mysterious; open and secretive. I felt the helplessness of a biographer in sifting and reconciling this material, in doing justice to an entire life. I became fascinated by the process of learning about someone whom I had never known, and could never have known, someone of whom I would have been oblivious had she not died.

Within a few weeks of her disappearance, many, many people had heard the name Lucie Blackman, and knew her face – or at least the version of it that appeared in the newspapers and on television, the Alice face of the girl in the missing-person poster. To them she was a victim, almost the symbol of a certain kind of victimhood: the young woman who comes to a ghastly end in an exotic land. So I hoped that I could do some service to Lucie Blackman, or to her memory, by restoring her status as a normal person, a woman complex and lovable in her ordinariness, with a life before death.

PART I

LUCIE



THE WORLD THE RIGHT WAY ROUND

EVEN LATER, WHEN she found it difficult to see any good in her husband, Lucie's mother, Jane, always acknowledged that Tim Blackman had saved their daughter's life.

Lucie had been twenty-one months old at the time, cared for by her father and mother in the cottage which they rented in a small village in Sussex. Since infancy, she had been stricken with fierce bouts of tonsillitis, which drove up her temperature and swelled her throat. Her parents sponged her with water to cool her down, but the fevers lingered, and when one had passed another would seize hold within a few weeks. One day, Tim had come home early from work to help Jane care for the needy child. That night, he was awakened by a cry from his wife who had gone in to look at her.

By the time he entered the nursery, Jane was already running downstairs.

'Lucie was motionless at the bottom of the cot, and she was clammy,' Tim said. 'I picked her out and put her on the floor, and she was turning grey in front of me, just the most sickly, blacky-grey colour. Quite clearly the life blood wasn't being pumped round her body. I didn't know what to do. I was cuddling her on the floor, and Jane had run down to phone an ambulance. Lucie was completely quiet, wasn't breathing. I tried to force open her mouth. It was tightly shut, but I forced it open with two hands and held it open with the thumb of one hand and put my fingers in and pulled her tongue forward. I didn't know whether I was doing any good or not, but I did it, and then I put her head to one side, and then I breathed into her and then pushed the air out, breathed into her and pushed it out, and she started to breathe on her own again. I was sick with anxiety and worry, and then I saw the pink coming back to her skin, and by that time the ambulance had arrived, and the ambulance blokes were rushing up the tiny, weeny stairs, these great big blokes with all this huge, noisy kit on, big beefy chaps who were as big as the cottage. And they got their stretcher out and strapped her

on and carried her downstairs and put her in the back of the ambulance. And after that she was fine.’

Lucie had experienced a febrile convulsion, a muscular spasm caused by fever and dehydration which had caused her to swallow her own tongue, blocking off her breathing. A few moments longer, and she would have died. ‘I knew at that moment that I could not only have one child,’ Tim said. ‘I knew. I’d thought about it before, when Lucie was born. But at that moment, I knew that if anything had happened to her, and we didn’t have any other children, it would be an absolutely terrible disaster.’

Lucie had been born on 1 September 1978. Her name was from the Latin word for ‘light’ and even in adulthood, her mother said, she craved brightness and illumination, and was uncomfortable in the dark, switching on all the bulbs in the house and going to sleep with a lamp turned on in her room.

Jane’s labour had to be induced, and lasted sixteen hours. Lucie’s head was positioned against her mother’s back, a ‘posterior presentation’ which caused her great pain during the delivery. But the eight-pound baby was healthy, and her parents experienced deep, but complicated, happiness at the birth of their first child. ‘I was delighted, absolutely delighted,’ said Jane. ‘But I think when you become a mother, you . . . I just wanted my mother to be there, because I was so proud I’d had a baby. But she wasn’t there, so it was sad as well.’

Jane remembered little but sadness from her own childhood. Her adult life, too, had been marked by clusters of crushing, overwhelming loss, which had bred in her a dry, dark humour, alternately self-deprecating and indignantly defensive. She was in her late forties when I first met her, a thin, attractive woman with short, dark blonde hair, and sharp vigilant features. Her outfits were tidy and demure, long, delicate lashes ringed her eyes, but the girliness which they might have suggested was dispelled by a fierce sense of rightness and a scathing intolerance of fools and snobs. Pride and self-pity were at war within Jane. She was like a fox, a stubborn, elegant fox in a navy-blue skirt and jacket.

Her father had been an executive with a film studio, and she and her younger brother and sister had grown up in the outer London suburbs, a

strict and rather drab middle-class life of homework and good table manners and the annual summer holiday in a gusty English seaside resort. When Jane was twelve, the family moved to south London. Before her first morning at her new school, Jane went in to kiss her mother goodbye, and found her asleep after a night of headaches and insomnia. 'I felt that something awful was going to happen,' Jane said. 'And I said to my father, "She's not going to die, is she?" and he said, "Oh no, don't be silly, of course not."' And then I came home from school that day, and she'd died. She'd had a brain tumour. And from then on my father was distraught. He was broken, a broken man, and I just had to be brave. That was the end of my childhood.'

Jane's mother was forty years old at the time of her death. 'My grandmother looked after us during the week, and at weekends it was Daddy,' she said. 'I remember him just crying all the time.' Fifteen months after his wife's death, he married a woman in her mid-twenties. Jane was appalled. 'But he had three children, and he just couldn't function. It was terrible. The truth is that I can't remember much of my childhood. When you've had a shock, and been through a time as painful as that, your brain makes you forget.'

Jane left school at fifteen. She took a secretarial course and found a job at a big advertising agency. When she was nineteen she travelled to Mallorca with a girlfriend and stayed there for six months, cleaning cars for a living. It was before the age of mass British tourism to Spain, and the Balearic Islands were still a select and exotic destination. The famous Manchester United footballer George Best was a visitor. 'I didn't meet him, but I remember seeing him in these bars, surrounded by beauties,' said Jane. 'But I was very sensible, I was very careful. I've got the word "sensible" running through my body like a stick of rock. Everyone else might have been swinging but I wasn't. I was just very boring.'

Once in Mallorca, Jane's virtue was tested by a young man, a nodding acquaintance, who appeared at her front door one day and attempted to kiss her. 'I was absolutely mortified, because I hardly knew him, and it was the middle of the afternoon. He was Swedish, I think. I hadn't given him any provocation, and it made me very wary after that. I liked the sun and the

sea, I liked being in the outdoors, but I can't say it was a wild time, because I'm sensible. I never slept with anyone until I slept with my husband.'

She was twenty-two when she met Tim, and living with her father and stepmother in Chislehurst in the London borough of Bromley. He was the older brother of a friend, and Jane had already heard all about him. 'People said to me, "That Tim's a right one,"' she remembered. "'A right one for the women.'"

Tim had just returned from the south of France, where he had been staying with a French girlfriend. 'But he started flirting with me anyway, and I gave him one of my icy stares,' said Jane. 'I think I was the first person in his life who hadn't fallen for him just like that, so I was a challenge. But I had no confidence, if I'm honest. I had lots of very beautiful girlfriends who had men flocking round them, but at discos I was always the custodian of the handbags. Tim couldn't understand why I hadn't fallen for him hook, line and sinker, and I couldn't understand why anyone would fancy me, and I think that's why I ended up marrying him.' The wedding was eighteen months later, on Tim's twenty-third birthday, 17 July 1976.

Tim managed a shoe shop in the nearby town of Orpington, a relic of the dwindling chain of businesses which his father had once owned across the south-east. But the shop failed, and Tim found himself claiming the dole for six months. He ended up supporting his young family with odd jobs for friends, as a freelance painter and decorator. 'We were living hand to mouth,' he said. 'They were very tricky, very tricky times in the early 1980s, and we didn't know where the next fifty pounds was coming from. But we were in this lovely place with our baby, this Laura Ashley-style cottage, and it was a very beautiful life. I loved that time when Lucie was little.'

In May 1980, less than two years after the first baby, Jane gave birth to Sophie, and, three years after that, to Rupert. Tim found a business partner, and moved from decorating into property development; in 1982 the family moved a few miles north to the genteel commuter town of Sevenoaks. Here, their period of hardship at an end, Jane was able to create for her own